
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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She spawned Madonna, socialized with Bob Hope, and had liaisons with NFL players, major celebrities, the No. 1 man on the FBI's Most Wanted List and at least three members of the WWE Hall of Fame. She was the inspiration for the springing up of dozens and dozens of leagues around North America full of people wanting to be her, almost all of whom weren't even born in her heyday. In her home San Francisco Bay Area, she was almost an area icon, eulogized this past week on television as the Babe Ruth of her sport.

While most of the mainstream national press largely ignored her in her heyday, she was embraced locally in her later years as the most colorful character of a fondly remembered period of Bay Area history. She was perhaps the only person who could pull off being a national celebrity in her youth, still being in the public eye in her 70s, while working a 9 to 5 job bagging groceries at Safeway in Millbrae, and not have it come across as the slightest bit sad. In life, she was, according to Jerry Seltzer, who owned the business that made her famous, "Much larger than Roller Derby," and in death, much larger than probably she herself could have even imagined.

Ann Calvello, who passed away on 3/14 due to liver cancer at the age of 76, was the greatest villain in the history of the Roller Derby. Derby was and in its various incarnations today, a pseudo-sport, almost a pro wrestling on wheels, that thrived at various times on television, and then, on a major league basis, died at the end of 1973. Called the greatest villain ever in sports this week in Sports Illustrated (I would agree with best woman performing villain in American sports, and even qualify that by saying performer because Tonya Harding is the most famous American female sports villain, but couldn't go farther than that), there was never a female performer in pro wrestling that played heel that could hold a candle to her. When it came to interviews, histrionics, timing or ability to play a live crowd, she was not the greatest in the history of sports, but only the best of the male wrestlers, and we're talking people the caliber of a Freddie Blassie, were at or above her level.

Roller Derby was a part of working class America, skating summers in the San Francisco Bay Area, and playing to sellout houses all winter doing one-night stands at the biggest arenas in the rest of the country. Her rival, Joanie Weston, was probably one of America's three most famous woman athletes of the 60s, along with Billie Jean King and Peggy Fleming.

It was an article by Frank Deford in 1997 when Weston died at the age of 62, that was read by TNN executives who decided to resurrect Roller Derby. The failed "Roller Jam," with skaters recruited largely for looks, fresh faced beauties with large implants and flat stomachs, posing in bikini calendars, and steroid enhanced men, had more of a sterile game show feel than the gritty reality that made the old sport popular. Joanie's husband, Nick Scopas, cried at the open of the new league, noting that Joanie's goal for nearly 25 years was to bring Roller Derby back, to the point she had built her own training center for a sport that barely existed, but in the end, she had to die to accomplish her goal. Even more sad was the reality that her death only led to another failed opportunity. Scopas, like all the Derby people who helped start "Roller Jam," was embarrassed very quickly by what it turned into. Jerry Seltzer, whose father invented and promoted the game, and who took it over and made it big again, was brought in by TNN to be a consultant. At an early meeting, in talking about the direction, with Seltzer talking about how to take it on tour and what cities to run, a 25-year-old executive made a comment to him about how that may have worked in his day, but times were different and that's not going to be how we are going to do things. TNN wanted Vince Russo professional wrestling on wheels, filled with wacky and totally unbelievable storylines, thinking that's what was hot on TV that year. Seltzer walked out of the meeting. As per his deal, he appeared on the show as the TV commissioner, but it was clear fast his heart wasn't into it. The operation opened with twice the audience either TNA or ECW opened with on the station, and even more than UFC opened

with and had no help from a giant Raw lead-in. But it went downhill fast.

But in one of the final episodes before it was canceled in 2000, Calvello was brought in for a match race at the age of 71. She was very unsteady on the track by that point. She had already battled brain cancer and hadn't even been on skates in three years. But it did allow her bragging rights to say she skated professionally in seven different decades. And she also noted to friends she was treated more as a star by management there than she ever was during her long skating career. She was treated by the skaters like Babe Ruth himself came back from the dead to watch over spring training.

But it was Calvello, due to her style and personality, who became the enduring symbol of the modern version Roller Derby. She was the prototype for the underground world of all-women skaters in leagues in every major city in North America, adopting punk rock personas, wearing sexy outfits, but hardly looking like the TV star looks of "Roller Jam" crew. It was more a world filled with trashy women you'd expect to see at dive bars, a world of heavy drinking and tattoos. But even though it didn't even fare as well on television as "Roller Jam," with not even the big first few weeks' ratings, and it was clear within a few weeks it was a television flop, the people involved were there to have fun and escape from their normal lives, not to be television stars, and it clearly has more legs. Currently, there are more than 80 documented all girl punk rocker style leagues in North America that have been based, the early ones on purpose, and probably most others without even knowing it, on the character Calvello made famous in the 60s.

And in a sense, that was probably a world Calvello would have loved to have been a part of, since it was what kept her on the track regularly until she was 68 years old, and fighting against women half her age was replaced by fighting for her life after being diagnosed with brain cancer. This past year, when a Bay Area girls league just starting out, with skaters who didn't even have a clue how to play the game, was raising money to run the league by having men spank the women skaters, Calvello, brought to the event as the celebrity guest, remarked that the skaters had a lot to learn about the game, but she sure liked their style.

Just a few weeks before her death, the A&E Roller Girls show that was just canceled, aired an episode where some of the Texas skaters went to the Bay Area to meet the woman whose persona was responsible for the latest rebirth. In an episode scheduled to air on 4/2, she is flown down to Austin, TX, to present the trophy to the winner of the league's championship, called the Calvello Cup.

Calvello herself loved being in the media, who actually made her an enduring legend when everyone else from her era and the game's history was largely forgotten. Everyone who ever promoted Roller Derby noted that no matter who it is, if they wanted to do a story, Calvello was always up for it. She'd meet reporters for lunch, and even take them to her apartment in San Bruno that was filled with a thousand different Lion souvenirs, from stuffed animals to pendants to photos, because she noted constantly that she was a Leo, which meant she always said what was on her mind. Long after Roller Derby died, she was a regular on sports talk shows, largely because of the legend she had when an early 70s appearance set the all-time record for calls in the early days of area sports talk radio. She talked sports, trends, or almost anything, and was always brash and opinionated, and you never knew what subject would come up and where the conversation would go. She was the subject of a movie documentary, the 2001 release "Demon of the Derby," that chronicled her life, and a photo book largely based on her career, called "Roller Derby Classics and more," was released by close friend Jim Fitzpatrick, a few months ago. All three other books on the history of the Derby all had chapters on her, and a fourth Derby novel had the lead villain completely based on her.

Older fans remember Ann and Joanie, almost nobody called them by their last names because they came across as, and actually were, the type of people who were on a first name basis with almost everyone they came in contact with. People remember them going at it for years and years. But in reality, their heyday as rivals in televised games from, in the familiar terms of announcer Walt Harris, "from Kezar Pavilion in Golden Gate Park in the city of San Francisco," was only from 1967-71. That was the period where the Joanie-led San Francisco Bay Bombers would skate various heel visiting teams captained by Annie, whether they be called the Northeast Braves, the Midwest Pioneers or the Brooklyn Red Devils (none of whom at the time ever played home games in the parts of the country they were supposedly to have been from).

The Roller Derby of the 60s and early 70s was a world full of stars that in many ways never outgrew the 50s, when the Derby of Jerry's father, Leo Seltzer was one of the biggest hits in the early days of television. The men still wore their hair in pompadours like James Dean or Elvis Presley, and many of the women dressed like Bobby Soxers.

Its biggest star, the real Babe Ruth of the Roller Derby was a skating phenom and legitimately tough as nails scrapper named Charlie O'Connell, who although known simply as Charlie, wasn't the kind of a guy who would be on a first name basis with almost anyone. But at the time he was the symbol of an entire sport.

The three big stars had their roles and specific reasons. Charlie was feared by his fellow skaters because he was the real article, and the biggest drawing card. He was the only one, who by the standards of the time, made big money at it. A kid from the streets of New York who got into skating and owned a house on a bill hill in the San Francisco suburbs, made more than all but the top real athletes in the major league sports did in the 60s. Charlie, whose nickname said it all—"Mr. Roller Derby"—was equally adept as skating "white-shirt" (home team, or babyface in wrestling parlance) as "red-shirt" (visiting team, or heel). He was a 6-2, 190 pounds when he was in his best shape, ferocious character in a world inhabited by mostly small men. Charlie was the most popular and biggest draw because he was the top white-shirt skater, but his only endearing quality was he was the best at what he did. He was perhaps even more hated as a red-shirt because he had an aura of being almost unstoppable, as nearly everyone in the league let him do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, in the games, because almost everyone genuinely feared him. Only a few, both in the fantasy world as well as the very real world that also existed as a hidden subplot in the games, would dare go toe-to-toe with him. Charlie hated dealing with people, and even though he was the biggest star, almost never dealt with the media. Even in the wake of the death of Calvello, he didn't speak anywhere, including for this story. He was aloof, barely acknowledged fans, and almost never signed autographs, but still Deford compared his character with a almost real life version of a Gary Cooper or a John Wayne as a guy who didn't say much, but his actions did the talking.

Even though he dated several women skaters and married two of them, Charlie was not a fan of the women's product. The men skated a faster, harder and more exciting game, but it was the women that gave the Derby its unique personality. The women always believed they were the actual draws, and there is little question that was the case in the 50s heyday. But O'Connell would openly give them no respect. Most of the time, he wouldn't go out during the pre-game warm-ups, since he didn't like to sign autographs and at least this allowed him to not have to skate around and ignore all the autograph seekers, which sometimes he did as well. He'd come out of the dressing room midway through the first period, stealing the thunder from the women on the track. Most of the time, when the women skated, instead of watching the game like a coach would, he'd skate back to the dressing room.

But it didn't work both ways. Once, when a women's captain left a game early, rather than stayed for the final period where the men would decide the outcome, Charlie went to teach a lesson. At a game in the small town of Petaluma, Charlie and Ken Monte did the infamous 14 overtime game. Derby games rarely ended in ties (for credibility, or perhaps for an angle where they wanted Joanie to score the winning points, overtime games did happen on rare occasions), even though the scores were always close. Rules were in a tie, the women would

get a five minute sudden death overtime period to decide it. That would usually mean the women decided it on the first jam. If by some reason, the women didn't score, the men would come out, but in the end, no game could end in a tie. Charlie's argument is how could a top woman star leave early, because, logically, if it's a tie, you'd have to come out and skate the overtime. Charlie told the women after the men left the game as a tie, only that the men were deciding the outcome and if anyone scored in the women's period, they were not going to like the consequences. So the women didn't score in the first period, as they were told, figuring the men would decide it. The men wouldn't score, because, as legend has it, Charlie and Monte were having so much fun banging the hell out of each other, teaching the women a lesson, and didn't want to go home yet. The women had to come back out, and when the men didn't score in the fourth overtime, they realized something was up. By the time it was over, both sides had to skate the equivalent to almost an additional game, but without scoring one point (the average Derby game would have both teams score about 40 points, while T-Birds Roller Games, with little defense involved, usually came close to 100 points for each team). The game went past midnight and most of the spectators went home before it was decided, and nobody seems to actually remember who won, only that the women learned a lesson that night and never dared leave early.

Joanie was known as "The Golden Girl" as well as "The Blond Amazon." She was a natural athlete who excelled at every sport she tried. She was a teenage softball legend growing up, batting .730 and breaking all school hitting records during her freshman year in college before leaving school to join the Derby at the age of 19. After taking it up when she was older on frequent vacations to Hawaii during the off-season, she could surf at nearly a professional level. The book on her was she probably could have been a star in any sport she devoted herself to. In the early 50s, the only professional sports avenue for a woman was Roller Derby. She had skated in roller rinks growing up in Los Angeles, and just out of high school, she and her high school best friend (who later became a fairly well known star herself using the stage name Toni Tagg) showed up before a game and asked to try out for the Los Angeles Braves. Three days later, she was skating on a professional team, if you call earning \$7 a game professional. A year later, she was considered one of the best skaters in the league. In some ways, she was the female equivalent of Charlie, as both were big, athletic, and fast on their feet. But in reality, they were completely different. Joanie had the bleached blond hair, her size, at 5-10 and 160 pounds, look and the way she carried herself gave her almost a regal presence on the track. She was the most popular skater in the league, and while far more an athlete than any kind of sex symbol, she was the hero to a generation of young women and children, as well as, not surprisingly, to the lesbian community in San Francisco.

Unlike the rest of Derby that seemed caught in the past, the visual standout was Anna Theresa "Banana Nose" Calvello, who with her multi-colored hair, sense of style both on and off he track, tattoos and color, was like a character transported from today's pop culture into a time machine back 40 years. However real Roller Derby was or wasn't, what was very real was that the greatest women's rivalry in American sports before the days of Chris Evert vs. Martina Navratilova in tennis, was Ann vs. Joanie. Their battles were syndicated on television all over the United States on a network of 120 stations.

The shows played in most markets on Saturday or Sunday afternoons, in those days when sports were king on weekend afternoon television. Even though the games were taped, and had no context when it came to standings, and results hardly seemed to matter or were ever referred to again unless it was the annual championship playoffs, they beat most anything on television during that time unless they were put against the NFL. They regularly beat the live NBA and Major League Baseball games in many markets. In San Francisco, on Sundays during the home summer season, from 5:30 to 7 p.m. on KTVU, Ch. 2, during its peak in the 60s, more people often watched Roller Derby than saw "Bonanza," and that was the most popular show on television at the time, airing on NBC later that night in prime time.

Ann, who was 5-6 and about 135 pounds, but because of her persona, is likely remembered as being much bigger, was by no means the best skater in the 38-year-history of a sport that has had a million failed attempted revivals over the past three decades. But she will be remembered as such by many, because without a doubt, she was the

most interesting, most talked about and most enduring figure. Perhaps the most stunning was the reaction to her death. One would have figured in the San Francisco Bay Area, it would get a good deal of attention. There were stories in every newspaper, as well as a nine minute feature on one of the local newscasts that was promoted all day, with host Gary Radnich having to fight back tears while the other anchors, were practically rolling their eyes unable to conceive of why so much attention was being devoted to a Roller Derby skater. But surprisingly, she got coverage in most major market newspapers, with major write-up in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times, not to mention small stories in both Sports Illustrated and even Time magazine. Deford said that if she played an "uptown sport," she'd be remembered in the same company as Babe Didrickson, Chris Evert and Peggy Fleming. It was really apropos that her death was ignored by the CNN's and ESPN's Sports Centers of the world. She grew up in a world where they didn't exist. In her world, it got no bigger than the New York Times, Sports Illustrated and Time.

Contrast that to Ken Monte, who died quietly, to absolutely no fanfare in 2004, even though he also lived in the Bay Area, but he hadn't been part of the local scene for the most part since his retirement in 1971 (he did a brief comeback in 1977). Monte was every bit the star as Calvello within Roller Derby, but his name did not transcend the game. They were the only two who were national stars during the early 50s when Derby was all over network television, and were still stars when syndicated television created the second boom. Monte, in fact, was clearly a bigger star than Ann in the first boom, as he was one of the first athletes to get a national TV endorsement for Lucky cigarettes. And as Charlie's fiercest rival and generally regarded as the No. 2 Derby men's player of all-time, was really higher if there was an "official" food chain of stars during the 60s.

Deford, considered by many as America's greatest sportswriter in history, knew Calvello for nearly four decades. He went on a Derby winter tour of one-night stands in 1969, sent by Sports Illustrated to do a feature on what was becoming a television phenomenon, as it was previously in the early 50s, and then seemed to disappear for many years except to its ardent fans. When getting word of her death, he tried to figure out how to sell the idea of a story on her. He strongly believed the story was warranted, but also felt, due to the nature of her sport, that it would be quite the political fight for him. When the New York Times did a big write-up, he thought the sell job would be easier because that gave his idea credibility. He was going to use that story as evidence when he called up, and found SI had been searching for photos of her and wanted and expected him to be doing a story.

"It's such a shame she didn't live to see just how well she's been remembered," said Deford., who always believed that Roller Derby, like wrestling, would always come back. "I think she'd have been surprised. The movie, the Calvello Cup, and this, has certified her legacy. It's really the end of an era, as she's the last one. Charlie disappeared (now 71, Charlie disappeared from the Roller Derby scene in 1979, and now lives with his wife, a one of the top female skaters of that era, Judi McGuire, shuttling between their two homes in Brentwood and Palm Springs). Joanie died young. This is really it."

To fully tell the story of Ann Calvello would probably require a book in itself, or at least a movie. You'd first have to explain Roller Derby, a world somewhat like wrestling that has been written about in a few books, but the inside details have never been talked about publicly. Some ardent fans of Derby and wrestling note that so many people have written stories dating back to the 30s on the inside of wrestling, but not one Roller Derby skater, even someone who only lasted a year or two, has ever publicly given the inside scoop on the game.

Roller Derby was formed in 1935 in Chicago by Leo Seltzer, a promoter looking for a live arena attraction. At first, it was men and women in a skating marathon, going in circles until they collapsed of exhaustion, similar to dance marathons that were the craze at the time. The marathons worked in some cities, and flopped in others. A popular part of the marathon is when they would have a few lap speed skating races. During those races, like in Olympic speed ice skating, there would be body contact. Since this was designed far more an entertainment novelty than a true sport, when the crowd would get into that part of the show more than the endless skating in circles, Seltzer,

along with Damon Runyon, the most legendary sportswriter of his time and a big fan, noticed the reaction.

After a 1937 game in Miami, the two set out changing the marathon into a sport, and came up with the rules, and basically in that one night, invented a sport, that quickly wasn't quite a sport. The game would be a series of jams, or in football terms, plays. There would be alternating periods with women and men. The belief was that the women, who were mostly out of high school or their early 20s, athletic and generally in better condition than most women of that period, were really the draws, even if the men provided the faster and harder hitting action. Games would be eight periods, women skating one, three, five and seven. The basic rules were the game was five on five, with two jammers, or sprinters, starting a play at the back of the pack, breaking free and speeding around to get to the rest of the pack skaters. For every member of the opposing team they passed, they would get one point. To pass skaters meant either outracing them, or more often, having a teammate physically knock them out of the way. Jammers on each team would break free, and while sprinting, attempt to eliminate the opposing team's jammer generally using elbow blocks, but sometimes knees, shoulders or hips. Anything but punching, kicking and wrestling were legal both on the jams, and by the blockers when they reached the back of the pack to both open up holes on the opposition to score, or to stop the jammer from passing. The jammers were small and speedy. The lead blockers on each team, who were generally the top stars, were usually bigger and more experienced. Around 1962, the pivot position with its shiny black helmet was created, usually for the top player on the team, who usually was the lead blocker, but had the option, if a jammer started the play, to score points himself. The position was created for Charlie himself, so a few times a game, the big stars like Charlie, Joanie and Ann, would jam go out on the chase and jam, and those would be the hottest plays of the game.

But what made Derby was the aggressive physicality, the hard blocking at fast speeds, and perhaps even more, the fights, which were most often staged. In the 40s, they relied on newspaper promotion and posters with photos of the prettier girls in tight fitting uniforms in short tights with their hair all made up, and guys brawling, usually with Leo's catch phrase, "Hell on Wheels." Even before the days of television, in 1941, with eight teams and as many as four games per night, legend has it the Derby drew four million fans, mostly in the Midwest and West Coast. That figure is almost surely exaggerated, but there are small newspaper clippings from those years which talk about selling about what today would be mid-sized arenas. The few attempts in New York, in those days the only city that mattered, didn't take. Then the war took most of the male skaters, and the operation limped along for a few years.

In those days, games were held for one, or two or even three week stands, in the same arena, and then they moved to a new arena in a new city, similar to the Barnum & Bailey's Circus today. The track was so difficult to set up and take down that they couldn't go from city to city like in the 60s. The skaters actually lived in the arenas, sleeping on cots. Since they were mostly young, an older authority figure was there to make sure the men stayed in their rooms and the women stayed in their rooms. They traveled with a professional cook who would make their meals. Ann joked that in her early years on the circuit, there were rats in the buildings they stayed so large they would steal her peanut butter sandwiches, and cockroaches so big they would try to steal her suitcases. Naturally, the biggest game was not played before the fans, but later in the arena, figuring out how to subterfuge the authority and score big off the track. This was the world Annie walked into shortly out of high school.

Ann was born in Newport, RI, on August 1, 1929. Her father was in the Navy, and they traveled a lot when she was growing up. She was the oldest of six kids, and when she was 11, her family moved to San Francisco. She was a star basketball player at Presentation High School, leading her team to championships in three of her four years on varsity. She claimed she was a straight A student in high school. Ann was known for being blunt, with an incredible memory for details, and for being honest, oftentimes brutally so. Still, the straight A's were disputed by her classmates (a few of whom were moms of my best friends growing up) who remembered her for being a non-stop talker, and a tomboy who regularly got into trouble. Women in those days

were not encouraged to be competitive in sports, so she hung around mostly with guys, drinking, playing sports, telling dirty jokes and raising hell.

One of her hangouts was the roller rink, where she would skate and race with the guys, because none of the girls could compete with her. A version of Roller Derby, actually a competing league called the International Roller Speedway, came into Oakland for a tour. Some of her friends went to a game and wanted to get in. Ann at the time had never heard of or seen Roller Derby. The promotion wasn't necessarily looking for good skaters, but they were looking for pretty girls to take on a European tour. Ann was by no means the prettiest girl in school, but she had what were called killer genes. Basically, she had a great body, that she was able to keep intact for decades. If her daughter was any indication, had Ann not worshipped the sun, which aged her face so badly, she easily could have passed for being 15 or 20 years younger. Terri Conte—she married and has since divorced one of the members of the famed band "Tower of Power," and if the last name sounds familiar—the first cousin of her ex-husband is the famed Victor Conte—is now 52. She didn't share her mother's love for being in the sun for eight hours a day. The last time I saw her, at the "Demon of the Derby" premiere in 2001, she looked like a hot 28-year-old. Indeed, in the Bay Area, and especially among people familiar with wrestling, and this was said even when she was in her early 60s by people who more than had their pick of the lot, shall we say, Annie's talents off the track, her sexual proclivity, were considered even more impressive than her talents at riling the audience and creating havoc on the track. It was her body that got her into the game, it was her skating that made her a star, and it was her uniqueness that made her much bigger than the game itself.

At roughly the same time Ann's tour came back from Europe, the real Roller Derby was becoming a national phenomenon.

In November of 1948, Leo Seltzer brought his Derby troupe to New York, the home of network television, once again hoping to somehow make it in a market that they could never get any attention in. TV was in its infancy and really just looking to fill time. The people who ran the networks never even heard of Roller Derby. After being turned down everywhere, somehow Leo managed to cheaply sell TV rights for a 13-week run to CBS. Roller Derby's first game on network television was November 29, 1948, at the 5,300 seat 69th Regiment Armory for a game between the New York Chiefs and the Brooklyn Red Devils. There were about 500 people at the game—maybe 100 paid. Once again, it looked like Derby was going to tank in New York. After a fight between Gerry Murray, the Joanie of her time as captain of the Chiefs and most popular skater, and Midge "Toughie" Brasuhn, the highly troubled, but most famous skater of her day, they, shall we say, popped the territory. Police on horseback had to come because ticket lines were so long for the game the next night. Most of the rest of the games, held six nights a week for the entire run, in the armory were sold out, and soon they upgraded to Madison Square Garden.

All four networks were calling when the CBS contract expired at the end of February, 1949. The Derby, and particularly Murray and Toughie, were on the front page of the newspapers and featured in national magazines.

ABC won the bidding war, for what at the time was huge money—\$5,000 per week for broadcast rights to air up to 12 hours of Derby action per week for the next two years. At the time, the amount of hours wasn't a concern, because nobody expected anything more than one or two games per week, airing on weekends, because that was the role of sports on TV in those days. But Derby was the first example of one of TV's great trends that continues to this day—find something hot, overexpose it, and burn it out way too fast. Think "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" Derby was the hottest TV show on ABC for the next year, which ended up airing live games for two-to-three hours, three nights per week, in prime time, and another game on Saturday afternoon.

With her experience in Europe, Ann was hooked. After the tour was over, she went to a Roller Derby training school in Salt Lake City, and was picked up quickly. She also had a unique skating style with a different type of arm movements and stride that made her stand out. For most of her life, in any social situation, no matter who was there,

including celebrities, when Ann was at a function, she was always the center of attention—she both looked and talked the part. While the Derby posters sold sex, drawings of blond women in tight shorts and tops were on the programs and posters, Ann always noted that unlike her first company, Roller Derby didn't want you if you couldn't skate the game. The actual uniforms used in games were bulky, more like hockey uniforms, but in publicity photos, the women posed in form-fitting tops and tight shorts. Ann always talked about her breasts, using the term "tickets," because she believed that's what caused men to buy tickets. Later in life, when she was the captain of her various teams, or even in media appearances posing with other women, as they were posing, Ann would bark, "tickets out girls, stomachs in."

Ann was picked up in 1949 and was a star on ABC television within three months. By Christmas, there was already an Ann Calvello Fan Club. She was by no means the biggest star of the women, as Murray and Toughie were the big two during the entire ABC run. Realistically, she was probably between the sixth and eighth biggest star. In the first year of Roller Derby doing national awards, in 1950, she was named to the All-Star team, so she was voted by her fellow skaters as one of the best eight. She placed 10th in fan voting for the All-American team (most popular, basically a fan vote at the arenas similar to what baseball did, and still does today, with its All-Star game) and was among the top scorers, usually skating with the Philadelphia Panthers (who actually skated home games in Philadelphia).

Perhaps the height of the Roller Derby's popularity was 1950. Toughie doing an early version of the ground and pound on Murray was the full cover of the May 27, 1950 issue of TV Guide, with a feature story on the upcoming World Series of the Roller Derby, held on several straight nights in Madison Square Garden playing to packed houses. But even though he was making money hand-over-fist, Leo Seltzer started getting worried about the monster called television. He wanted to end the 1949 season after the successful championship playoffs, which would seem to make sense. ABC thought differently. The network needed Derby, or its prime time schedule would collapse, and the network wasn't thinking long-term. The idea of reruns hadn't come about in television, and for two years, Derby aired four games per week, 52-weeks a year, on network television, much to the chagrin of its owner, who didn't realize his broadcast partners would be so short-sighted. Seltzer and ABC were at odds when the contract expired in early 1951, because all that free television was hurting the live gates and he saw the handwriting on the wall. The story of Derby in many ways was the first example of many aspects of television. The truth is, its success did not prove so much the power of the game, as much as the power of television. Indeed, one could argue the first example of the new power of television in society was the night of the first game, when Leo's number was given during the telecast for ticket reservations for the rest of the run, and he and his wife were up until 3 a.m. processing orders.

A major company wanted to sponsor games after the ABC deal expired, and Leo wanted only one game a week on television, but the sponsor had a problem with being turned down by another sport, suddenly hated television, and pulled out. Quite frankly, if Derby was at hot at that point as it was a year earlier, that wouldn't have mattered. CBS and NBC weren't interested, because as Leo expected, interest had fallen in the last few months due to overexposure.

Gene Gammon, the husband of Gerry Murray, and arguably the best male skater of the time, referred to that period as, "Every day was Christmas." Even without television, they continued strong for a while in the Northeast, and even set records when the 1951 World Series of Roller Derby that summer drew 82,000 fans over five straight nights at Madison Square Garden just through the power of newspaper advertising and coverage, with the Chiefs winning the championship.

"A lot of people didn't understand Annie and not everybody liked her," said Murray, now 81, in the book "Roller Derby to RollerJam." "She was always outspoken and said what was on her heart."

Ann remained one of the top jammers and made the All-Star team again that season and the next season. But soon after Derby lost TV, Ann's life was changing. She became tight with referee Roy Langley, which has its ironies since Ann gave referees hell most of her career.

She was known as the "Queen of the penalty box," billed, and it was almost surely true, as holding the all-time record for penalty minutes for anyone in any sport. They were married on August 23, 1952, and both quit the Roller Derby to move back to San Francisco. Her daughter, Theresa Ann Langley, known as Terri, was born on August 11, 1953. Ann always felt a closeness to Hulk Hogan, and when she first met him in the 80s backstage at a WWF Superstars taping at the Cow Palace, her opening line to him was how both he and her daughter were born on the same day, and both had the same first name. Roy Langley was an alcoholic, and an abusive husband, a fact that was largely kept secret even to Calvello's friends. While Calvello openly would tell everyone the story of her life, her marriage was a closed subject, other than it didn't work, as it clearly left scars. Most had generally assumed she was the heel, deciding to go back skating and abandoned her young daughter to be a star, who was raised by her father and her grandparents. The two were actually quite close after Derby closed, as Terri often went to Derby games, parties and reunions with her mother, but their relationship was almost more like a domineering big sister. When Ann would talk about her in her years on the road, she would brag about how beautiful her daughter was, and note that she grew up as Terri Langley, and didn't have to grow up in school in the Bay Area with the last name Calvello, and that people didn't know who her mother was so she didn't have to deal with that pressure. In "Demon of the Derby," her daughter did make it clear how hard it was and how much she missed out by not having a mother most of the time growing up.

It wasn't until a neighbor of hers from that era in "Demon of the Derby" talked about their fights and explained what she had heard with her own ears that Ann had to put up with, that it ever came out, shocking even Derby insiders who thought they knew her life since it was largely an open book.

The Derby moved its operations from New York to Los Angeles after it ran out of steam losing television. In 1954, Leo created what ended up being the most famous team ever in the U.S. They were first called the California Bombers, but around 1956, were renamed the San Francisco Bay Bombers. Ann was on the original team in 1954, as the No. 2 female star behind Annis "Big Red" Jensen. The Bombers at first were mainly a red-shirt team, playing against the Los Angeles Braves. While most of the skaters hung around each other, Ann was wild, dressing outrageously for her time, and hung with many movie star types in Hollywood like Bob Hope, Harpo Marx, Robert Wagner and she was regularly seen in the company of 50s actor Troy Donahue. Jerry Seltzer noted on TV after her death that "Men loved Ann," but wouldn't take it any farther.

Charlie, a New York kid who grew up skating on sidewalks, whose grandmother told him to try out for Derby, and the most promising young skater in the league, was sent to San Francisco when the Bombers started. The two had a torrid affair that lasted six years, starting when Charlie was 20 and Ann was 26. As the story goes, Ann stole Charlie from Loretta "Little Iodine" Behrens, another skater, starting a feud between the two that was legendary behind the scenes. But Ann and Behrens had gotten close in recent years.

"Ann and I were very good friends when I first came into Roller Derby," Behrens wrote the day of Ann's death. "I treasure every moment that we had together, along with our other friends. Of course through the years there were words. What friends don't have disagreements? When I look at this picture of the two of us together at the San Jose Civic Auditorium a year ago October, I get a lump in my throat. People can say what they wish to say about our friendship, but I know that this night all hatchets were buried. I will miss her very much, but I know that she is in a better place now."

Charlie and Ann both wore No. 40, which meant they paired together during pre-game warm-ups. Ann already had her own style. Her uniform had a low plunging neck line and a zipper, which sometimes caused rivals who were mad at her for her aggressive play or her outspoken personality to retaliate by grabbing the zipper and fully jamming it into her "tickets." She rolled the sleeves up on her uniform, revealing muscular arms. She never lifted weights, but she would lay in the sun all day so she had the tan, sometimes did rowing, but it was more her freaky genes, plus skating every night kept her toned. If she

was 30 today and people saw her on the street, they would immediately think she lives in a tanning bed, goes to the gym every day, eats carefully, got a boob job and takes low doses of steroids. The Bombers skated at the Cow Palace, but 1,200 fans was considered a good night. It was going nowhere. Leo's son, Jerry, had just gotten out of Northwestern University, and before getting a job, showed up and did some trackside announcing and scorekeeping. His father was just about to shut the entire operation down, after a last ditch effort to save it by the 1958 attempt in New York, where they did an entire season of legitimate games. It was the only time in Derby's history such a thing happened. Leo had come to the conclusion that it was the lack of legitimacy that had killed his product. But it didn't pan out, although the rookies that came out of that New York season ended up being some of the greats that carried the game in the 60s, including Buddy Atkinson Jr. (whose mother, Bobbie Johnstone Atkinson, was Ann's captain on the Panthers when she started, and whose father trained almost all the Derby stars, and he later married a skater, his daughter briefly skated and his son was the top male star in RollerJam), Mike Gammon (the son of Gerry Murray and stepson of Gene Gammon, who learned to skate at 18 months and ended up a prodigy of the sport as the most gifted jammer in its history), Judi McGuire and Ronnie Robinson.

The son decided to give it a try. Jerry never saw Roller Derby as anything lasting, but he enjoyed promoting. What saved the game was Jerry getting the Bombers on KTVU, Ch. 2, an Oakland based station, in 1958, which was just starting up and had little programming that was drawing any viewers at the time. The station would grow, with the Bombers, to be the strongest independent TV station on the West Coast.

Ann always talked about her romance with Charlie. The first time I interviewed her for a long story, some 20 years after they had broken up and she was already in her 50s, she brought up out of nowhere, "You know, I used to date Charlie O'Connell," as if it was a bigger deal than the celebrities and other sports stars she'd been with.

People who knew both couldn't fathom the relationship working, at least from a personality standpoint. Both were their own people who wanted to do what they wanted and were totally domineering over their own lives. Ann was as outgoing as they came and made everyone she came in contact with immediately feel like a long-time friend. Charlie had his inner circle of a few friends and didn't want to deal with anyone else. They had nothing in common, other than they were both stars on the Bombers, and their fights and break up were legendary.

At her death, the story of Ann going heel, which was the greatest move of her career, told by most, including Jerry Seltzer, was that she hated being a white-shirt and demanded to be switched. Fitzpatrick, a former skater and close friend, said that the real story was that after the nasty break-up, both Charlie and Ann went to Seltzer, both demanding the other goes. Seltzer naturally went with Charlie, who was by then already the best player in the league.

Ann went to the Brooklyn Red Devils, and started really developing her heel style. There are many different versions of the story as to where the different color hair came from. By the 80s, she was known by most people in the area as that Roller Derby woman from the old days with green hair, although she actually wore it in many different colors depending on her mood and what team she was skating with. Probably the most accurate story is that all the women were dying their hair blond, she'd done that as well, and she simply wanted to be different and stand out. While Derby lore has that she was in her glory playing heel, Fitzpatrick said she told him differently. In 1961, when both the New York and Los Angeles circuits were shut down because they weren't drawing, and San Francisco was doing great, it became a Northern California league. That meant the red-shirt teams didn't get much work. The Bombers would alternate skating three or four different red-shirt teams for generally two weeks at a time, skating five nights a week in different cities, playing the Cow Palace every Saturday night, Kezar Pavilion for TV every Sunday, San Jose every Monday, and other cities within driving distance on Thursdays and Fridays. While the Cow Palace drew the biggest crowds, and by this point the biggest games like the mid-season and final championship playoffs sold out and turned people away, San Jose was the other

hotbed, skating most of the time outdoors at the local baseball stadium, the Bombers were the city's hottest sports attraction.

But that meant Ann was only working about two out of every eight weeks, and they only skated April through the end of September. She was actually a bigger star than ever because the Derby had gotten so big on local television, but worked as a cocktail waitress much of the year. Still, that year, something major happened. One of the Derby's sponsors opened a car dealership in Eugene, OR, and to get publicity, wanted to sponsor Derby tapes on a local station. The product was really hitting its stride behind Charlie, and they started getting an unusual amount of fan mail from Eugene. In passing, announcer Walt Harris mentioned a letter, and without being told, brought up off-handedly that maybe you fans in Eugene would like to see a live game. Well, that was it. Letters poured into Bomber headquarters. On a Thursday night, they loaded up two teams on an airplane and went up to Eugene, and they sold out and turned people away. Jerry figured if it would work in Eugene, it would probably work everywhere, and started building a nationally syndicated TV network. The method worked so well that by 1963, they had TV in much of the country and did the first winter tour. He provided the tapes for free, in exchange for two minutes of advertising time. The idea would be to do something just like wrestling. They would schedule a game in the market, and then for two months before, the top skaters on the two teams would do customized interviews about the game in the market. It was a killer formula for everyone. The stations, particularly the newer UHF stations that were springing up and garnering almost no audience in markets, got an hour of programming that usually did big ratings and often allowed them to beat their network opposition. And Derby wasn't just on weak stations, as it aired in numerous markets on network affiliates. The tapes were bicycled around the country. There were maybe only a few masters of each show. Stations would get a tape, and then be sent the postage to mail the tape onto another station. Many stations got the tapes a couple of months after the games were actually played. Then final station on the cycle would send the tape back to KTVU, and it would be taped over. Very little original Derby footage remains. When Ann died and local stations were looking for footage, the only stuff they could find of her glory days were clips of her from the movie "Derby." Believe it or not, there is some footage from the ABC games in the 50s, and clips shown over and over were, sadly, her, in her late 60s, in her last games.

Very quickly, it was the winter games on tour that were where most of the money was made and Jerry became rich. Even those in the Bay Area who had no use for Roller Derby admitted Jerry himself was a great promoter. Besides television, the Derby used a simple but effective promotional system. During every game, Harris would tell fans if they sent in a self addressed stamped envelope, they could get a free copy of the Roller Derby rules. At live events, fans were encouraged to leave their name and address before they left the building so they could be put on the Roller Derby mailing list or be sent in the mail a free copy of the rules. Jerry didn't make his road schedule based on TV ratings, which he never trusted, but he felt volume of mail coming from a market was a much more accurate tool to determine where games would draw. A couple of months before a game in their market, everyone who had signed up would be sent a letter letting them have the first shot at tickets to the one game per year in their area.

When Jerry and a promoter in Mexico made a deal to start up the Mexico City Cardenales, she went there as the top woman babyface star. They did very well at first, but it didn't sustain itself. She was 34 years old and fed up with working part-time. She was at the athletic peak of her career. She was the leading women's scorer for the season, despite being primarily a blocker, and for the first time, after her 8th career appearance on the all-star team, the skaters voted her the 1963 Most Valuable Player award, the only year she would ever win such an honor. She retired the next day, and moved with a boyfriend to Hawaii, where she could lie at the beach or row the canoe in the ocean all day year-round, and find a job at a club working at night.

Ironically, her career was just beginning. After Roller Derby left Los Angeles in 1961, many of the skaters didn't want to move to San Francisco, the only place where games were being held on a full schedule and the last surviving hotbed. The skaters tried to promote on

their own, and, being skaters, quickly failed. Bill Griffiths, who was the advertising executive for Maywood Bell Ford, which sponsored the Braves Derby games, got a TV deal with KTLA in Los Angeles for the new skaters league. That was the station that also carried wrestling, and got Dick Lane, the legendary wrestling announcer, to broadcast. That wasn't unusual, because in San Francisco, Harris, the Derby announcer, also broadcast Roy Shire's wrestling. With the skaters operation about to collapse, KTLA told Griffiths that he promised them two hours of weekly product and his name would be mud in the town if he didn't deliver. All of a sudden, he pulled things together and ended up as the boss of the league. The Seltzers owned the Roller Derby name, so Griffiths called his operation Roller Games, and his white-shirt team was called the Los Angeles Thunderbirds, named actually as a tie-in with Thunderbird, the new hip car in the Ford line. Like the car, which was immortalized in a Beach Boys song, the team also became better known years later as the T-Birds.

To the unaided eye, they were largely the same, except Roller Games had higher scores, and in Derby, everyone wore a helmet and in Games, only the two jammers did. But to the skaters, they were altogether different.

Roller Derby was the glory days of New Japan Pro Wrestling. Roller Games was the glory days of WWE. They drew different fans, most of whom loved one product and didn't like the other. Derby drew more of a sports audience, while the wilder Games drew a strong minority audience. To this day, fans will argue vehemently about which was better, usually siding with the one they grew up with. There was a tremendous rivalry of the skaters themselves. At times, the two leagues were at odds and they competing with each other like an ugly pro wrestling local promotional war. Other times, they observed an unwritten rule to stay out of each other's territory, and even at times traded red-shirt teams to freshen things up. There were even All-Star games and interpromotional games which at times turned nasty with a high injury rate. Joanie even injured her high school best friend, Toni Tagg, who stayed in Los Angeles and became a star with the Roller Games. In another game when the Roller Games All-Stars were skating Derby style, Shirley Hardman suffered a broken back that ended her career as a full-time skater and led to her becoming the first female infield coach in history.

Perhaps the most famous incident was when Leroy Gonzales of Roller Games was in an interleague game at Kezar Pavilion in San Francisco on live television, and purposely broke Charlie's nose in a fight. He was immediately thrown out of the game. Knowing there would be a likely rematch in the dressing room, Gonzales snuck out of the building before the game was over, but not before leaving a note in the dressing room for him, reading, "The King is Dead. Long live the Queen." For a long time, that was the behind-the-scenes battle cry of the Games' skaters, a strong number of whom were gay (that was the case in Derby as well). The Bombers had skated the T-Birds Roller Games style in Los Angeles, but Charlie didn't skate as he briefly retired to become an infield coach. To repay the favor, when the T-Birds were brought up to San Francisco to skate the Bombers Roller Derby style for the first game ever at the Oakland Coliseum Arena in 1967, the word got out that Charlie was looking for revenge. The T-Birds men's skaters were scared to death before the game started. In fact, Danny Reilly, the team's powerhouse blocker and enforcer, was afraid to skate the game and never left the dressing room. The Derby skaters always considered themselves superior because their game looked more realistic, and they were trained to shoot first and entertain second. It was a slower, harder hitting, more defensive oriented game. The more offensive Games style encouraged a faster and more showboating style, particularly from the jammers, and it was a game with more of a reliance on speed. The Games skaters, particularly in later years, would admit the Derby's skaters superiority in the blocking aspect, but would claim their overall superiority, when they skated against each other, was not all it was cracked up to be by the Derby skaters. They claimed their faster-paced game evolved whereas the skating skill level within Derby stagnated with the frowning upon the outrageous.

The Roller Derby training school in Alameda, taught by Buddy Atkinson Sr., and wife Bobbie Johnstone Atkinson, taught skaters first how to skate on a banked track, then how to block and fall, and then put them in games at the center, and rookie league games one or two nights a

week at 7 p.m. before the Bombers game started. The training center games and rookie league games were a complete shoot. When someone was good enough to be picked up, only then were they told about cooperation and the signature "plays." The idea was that every Roller Derby trained star was trained to shoot, and could go for real, but they entertained in the games because they were there to please the crowd. The game itself was fast and hard hitting, and, at least as compared to other forms, realistic. The referees were instructed to call the game as a shoot. A heel like Ann had to watch the refs when she would hit skaters from behind with her helmet, or sucker punch them, because if they saw, she was in the penalty box. Sometimes they saw and sometimes they didn't, and she got better at it as the years went by. If she got eight minutes in penalties, like a basketball player, she fouled out. They called it kicked out of the game. It was a game within a game for her, because in the Joanie vs. Ann glory days, the entire game built to a crescendo, and Annie couldn't get kicked out until the end of the seventh period. The referees were never told to protect her when she came close to fouling out early, so if she got wild and careless early, she had to spend time later in the game on her best behavior.

Ann's style was to cheap shot the smaller Bomber girls. Her favorite victim was a 4-11, 95-pound crowd favorite named Carol; "Peanuts" Meyer. When Joanie, the enforcer, turned around, Ann backed off and skated away, even calling the refs to intercede. She'd cheap shot Joanie routinely as well as well, usually from behind. Usually there would be a spot early where they both jammed together, and Ann would watch for the ref's blind spot, and grab Joanie's jersey from behind and send her into the rail. This would lead to Ann coming around and Joanie would be waiting there to block, and pummel her until the end of the jam, with the biggest shot saved for last as Ann would take her patented slow bump, where she'd be on one skate and lean backwards, seemingly forever, before finally going down, usually timed right at the buzzer ending the 60 second jam time, for the maximum pop. But she'd bop Joanie with her helmet, punch her when she wasn't looking, cheap shot her with an elbow to the ribs between plays, and run, until the "seventh period blowout." At that point, they gave the crowd what they had waited all night for. Joanie finally had enough with the clock running down in the last women's period, and went to start the fight. Like a rat cornered, Ann wouldn't back down. They'd trade punches, Joanie would get the better blows in, and Ann would take a big bump, sell, and sitting on her butt, throw a facial temper tantrum. Penalties like crazy would be called, and the men would have to skate the first jam short-handed, usually on both teams, as the guys had to serve out the penalty time incurred by the women. The girls' role was to keep the game close, and games almost always ended on the last jam—skated by the men who unless it was a rare overtime game, always decided the outcome. For realism, the Bombers usually won 55 to 65% of their games. It was a weird mentality, as if the Bombers always winning, or even winning too high a percentage, would make it fake, but every single game always coming down to the last play wouldn't be a tip-off.

Roller Games was more wide open. The game had infield managers who interfered (Derby did pick this up years later), midjets, fat women who could barely get around the track on skates (most notable being 300-pound Erlene "747" Brown, a famous Olympic games woman shot putter in another lifetime), and heel referees. The games were far more choreographed, with angles far more outlandish than anything any pro wrestling promotion at the time was doing. It was more a weekly soap opera built around characters with the team game itself as more of a backdrop, drawing based on the interviews on television that built up the week's halftime match races, which usually had some sort of a stipulation attached to them. Skaters were taught the game, as opposed to being taught to shoot first. Even among those who starred in Roller Games, there was a sense of pride if they had been trained in Derby. There was far less pretense of legitimacy. By the late 60s, Derby was the dominant brand in much of the country, but the Games version was equally popular in both Southern California, and the Philadelphia area, where a white-shirt team called the Eastern Warriors was formed by Griffith's partner in the T-Birds, Jerry Hill, and featured at first several members of the strong New York Chiefs Roller Derby team. Seltzer had fired the entire team right before the 1966 playoffs when he heard rumblings they were going to leave the league and start up a promotion on their own. The practice of shooting and going against the finish was known as "bootlegging the game." Seltzer was evidently afraid on the last play, they would try it and keep the

Bombers from winning the championship as they did every year in those days. The idea is after stealing the championship, who would bill themselves as the world champions and break away. As noted by insiders, even with Charlie out there, with the twosome of Atkinson Jr., and particularly Gammon, they could have possibly pulled it off, although Larry Lewis, one of the great skaters of the era, said that trying to bootleg the championship would have meant having to get past both O'Connell and Cliff Butler, "and that was easier said than done."

There is only one known occurrence where this happened. In the 1968 Roller Games World Series final, Leroy Gonzales, who was at odds with Griffiths, wouldn't let Valladares of the T-Birds pass him as scheduled for the winning points, and the improbable happened with the red-shirt Detroit Devils winning the championship from the T-Birds in Los Angeles. This is the only time anyone can recall it happening in a championship game. There was hell to pay. Griffiths had already printed up new programs to sell at the games starting the next week, with the cover headline, "T-Birds win 6th straight title," and describing the entire championship series that somehow came down to the last jam in the 7th and deciding game, and how, like always, Little Ralphie came through in the clutch to score the winning points. He had to shred 10,000 programs, and had no programs to sell for the next series of games. Gonzales was, of course, fired for that, but they eventually brought him back.

The Warriors' style, since several of the Chiefs were on the original team and Atkinson and Gammon were the first male stars, was a mix of the two, and many would argue, the most entertaining style of all.

In 1965, Griffiths got television in Honolulu and started the Hawaiian Warriors (the team that moved to Philadelphia a few years later). With Ann living there, she had the best of both worlds, the beach every day and her dream job every night. She skated first on the home team, but then turned heel, and captained red-shirt teams, including a team called the San Francisco Shamrocks. The green hair may have debuted years earlier, but this was where it was popularized. Griffiths, who was more into outrageous personalities, loved her style, particularly the way she dealt with the media, and wanted her as his top woman star in his plans to open up Australia. At the same time, Joanie pulled a power play of her own. During the off-season after the 1964 season, she went out East to skate with a new promotion being run by wrestling legend Buddy Rogers. She told Jerry that she wasn't going to come back unless he gave her the top spot in the company, as Bombers women's captain. Jerry forced Annis "Big Red" Jensen, who had captained the Bombers since their inception, to announce her retirement, and Joanie got the role she was always remembered for. Publicly the story was different. Jensen, who had children, wouldn't leave the Bay Area for the winter tours, so Joanie would be the female star of the Bombers on the road as the heir apparent, but during the season, she was still on a red-shirt team. Jerry claimed he made the change for continuity reasons.

In 1965, the inevitable promotional war had also taken place. Griffiths got television in San Francisco, and made the Shamrocks a home team, skating in many of the same buildings as the Bombers. He raided Joe Foster, who was the Bombers No. 2 guy behind Charlie, to head the men's side, and used Ann as his top woman skater. Seltzer reformed the Los Angeles Braves as a home team for Los Angeles. The war was nasty. When the Shamrocks had games in cities, Seltzer would take out ads in the newspaper with the Roller Derby emblem and simply state there is no Roller Derby game in town tonight, while elsewhere Griffiths would have the ad for his game. But for fans in San Francisco, many remember this period fondly because they could see the Shamrocks, who skated more of a solid Derby style because that's what the area fans wanted, in the afternoon at Winterland Arena, and then drive to Kezar and see the Bombers for their 4:45 p.m. start TV game. They remember the ability to see the top stars in both leagues who knew they were in San Francisco, so they had to play a solid game. Among the skaters, San Francisco and New York were known as the skating cities, because they had the most knowledgeable fan bases. But the Bombers outdrew the Shamrocks two-to-one, and the opposite was true in Los Angeles. The war was shortlived with both incumbent promotions winning their home turf rather handily.

Griffiths had gotten T-Bird tapes on Australian network television. During the mid-60s, Derby had the edge in syndicated its tapes around the United States and into Canada, but Roller Games concentrated internationally. While at the time, the Bombers were America's team, so to speak, the T-Birds really were more famous world-wide. The Warriors were largely unknown outside the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington area.

The relationship between Jim Barnett, the wrestling promoter in Australia, and the Roller Games, has always been talked about. Barnett claimed he was involved in getting the T-Birds on television and bringing them over. Griffiths denied Barnett having anything to do with it. What is known is the skaters and wrestlers stayed at the same hotels, partied on the same beaches during the day, and worked the same arenas, albeit on different nights of the week.

Ann always talked about 1966 in Australia as one of her fondest career memories. Griffiths sent Ralphie Valladares, his jamming speedster who was an All-Star in Derby when he broke in, known as the "Guatemalan Flyer," the top star of the T-Birds, for authenticity that this really was the T-Birds, to be coach, and Calvello, as the top woman's star, to open the country up in January. They arrived and did the media work for the new Australian Thunderbirds, who wore uniforms exactly like the Los Angeles version, trying to make the fans think they were getting the actual famous team, but it had moved to Australia. Valladares was a tiny skater, only 5-2. In publicity photos when they arrived, Ann was carrying Valladares in her arms as sort of a mixed gender role to get her over as a powerful and strong woman star. They were booked for three months, but were drawing so well, they stayed for a year. Ann, who dyed her hair red, white and blue that year, the T-Bird colors, made the cover of Australia's TV Guide once, and a second time had a big color photo of she and Valladares for a story on the country's fascination with Roller Games.

Once again, she spent every day at the beach, and they were staying at five-star hotels, skating every night, and after every game, she was at the bar until closing time, got her five hours sleep and woke up and hit the beach. She was treated as royalty, as no matter where they skated, she said she never had to pay for a drink all year. It was at this point where she became a big wrestling fan, as she met the Americans who were on tour, and in particular hooked up with Pepper Gomez, since both had San Francisco stardom in common.

Even though she really only skated for him for about three years, Griffiths ranked Calvello, along with Shirley Hardman, his own all-time greatest draw, as the greatest villains he ever had.

"She was a wide open personality who wouldn't take no for an answer," he said. "She did what she felt was in her best interest, and sometimes she didn't go by the book. She had a strong opinion of what people wanted to see, and she went out to fulfill it all the time. I wouldn't necessarily say she was the best, but she was in the top group, and it was a small group. Ann and Shirley Hardman, I'd put at the top of the list. The rest I'd say, compared to those two, were wannabees."

Still, Hardman's death in 1973, while she was the first female coach of a major white-shirt team, the peak of her stardom, got only minimal news coverage in Los Angeles, and virtually none anywhere else, and this came during arguably the high point of the T-Birds' popularity. The official explanation was she suffered a massive heart attack while on a flotation device in a pool, fell off and drowned.

After both Griffiths and Seltzer had failed in each other's home territory, they had a meeting at a hotel in the San Francisco airport to basically respect each other's territory, and even work together. In the summer season of 1966, several red-shirt Roller Games teams came to San Francisco during the season to face the Bombers, and several red-shirt Derby teams went to Los Angeles to face the T-Birds. While that continued from time-to-time, it was fairly rare after the 1967 season, and didn't really pick up again until 1972.

Ann was back with the Derby in 1967 to start her most famous run. By this point, the Derby had hit its stride. The Bombers actually outdrew

the Oakland A's when they first came to town, as well as the NBA's San Francisco (now Golden State) Warriors. Technically they outdrew the NFL teams as well, but that's an unfair comparison because the Bombers skated about 110 home dates and the NFL teams played seven regular season and three preseason home games. While Ann, as a red-shirt member, usually with the Midwest Pioneers where she was known for lavender hair to match the team's uniform, was only part-time during the summer season, she was full-time all winter when she and Joanie took their rivalry out on one-night stands before the biggest crowds of the year. It paid the bills. Ann made considerably more than most women in the work force in that era, even if \$500 a week today doesn't like much. She only got paid the weeks she worked, and joked that at the height of her stardom, between tours, she'd be on the unemployment line, where she said she signed more autographs than she ever did at games. While in San Francisco, she socialized a lot with Pat Patterson and Ray Stevens, who were the heel world tag team champions for Roy Shire. She had an affair with Stevens, and she would go to the matches at the Cow Palace if she was off, and if they were off, they'd sometimes come to the Derby games. As funny as this sounds, especially today, most of the Derby skaters didn't like wrestling, thinking it was too phony and actually thought Ann being in public with Stevens & Patterson would make people who saw them question the legitimacy of their sport.

But from wrestling, she honed her interviewing skills. You never knew what she would say on camera, from making fun of Walt Harris' toupee, to calling Seltzer "Drip & Dry," and making fun of his suits. After she split Peanuts Meyer's head open in a brawl, requiring 17 stitches, just before Meyer's wedding to fellow skater Tony Roman, she nicknamed Meyer "The Bride of Frankenstein." Griffiths booked the Rose Bowl in Pasadena for a July 4, 1973, game and to make it special, brought in Seltzer's Brooklyn Red Devils, with Ann as the big star, for one game only. Ann, who was almost 44 at the time, came down dressed in a short skirt and suggestive top, in the announcers' booth. Out of nowhere as Dick Lane was calling the game, she said out of nowhere, "Dick, get your hand off my knee." Lane, who never lost it in years of doing wrestling, movies, Derby and practically everything else, freaked out on live television.

It was the road tour that made the Derby most of its money and is fondly remembered for all the sellouts. The most successful tour was in the winter of 1969-70, when they actually split the Bombers into two different touring teams to accommodate the demand for dates, with Charlie headlining the San Francisco Bay Bombers, and Joanie leading the Oakland Bay Bombers, who skated all winter against Ann's Pioneers. In about 175 winter dates between the two squads, they drew 1.5 million fans over four months, more than WWE will do domestically over a full year. If you include the Bay Area season, it is possible that more people paid to cheer the Bombers over a one year period than any other team in sports. The figure is even more incredible considering the number of 10,000 seat arenas in the country in 1969 was nowhere near what it is today. But when people would bring up going all over the country to big enthusiastic crowds, she'd downplay it, talking about having to drive hours daily all winter long through the snow in the Northeast and the Midwest. The schedule was a killer, and until late 1971, unlike a WWE tour, it made no geographical sense. Calvello's joke was that Seltzer booked the tour by looking at a map of the United States, grabbing darts, blindfolding himself, turning around backwards, and then throwing over his shoulder.

"She told me that everyone remembers the sellouts at the Cow Palace and the Garden, but it wasn't like that every night," Fitzpatrick said.

It was a long winter of mostly long drives with their own cars. They'd go from city to city for about four months, and never go home, searching for Laundromats in cities they didn't even know. Worse, for Ann, there was no such thing as a day off. The days she didn't have a game, she and Ronnie Robinson would be sent to a big city they had coming up to do advance publicity work. Ann was there to talk the people into buying tickets. Robinson, one of Charlie's top villain rivals, came with her, because he was the son of boxer, Sugar Ray Robinson, who was one of the biggest sports legends that most of the people in the media had grown up on, so it opened up doors that would under normal circumstances be closed to Roller Derby.

In 1969, Deford was sent by Sports Illustrated to go on the winter tour with the Derby, which by this point was one of television's hottest syndicated properties, with eight million weekly viewers—more than ever watched Raw at its peak. Seltzer was scared to death that they might write that the sport was a fake. Skaters didn't know how to take this famous sportswriter who they were scared could ruin their business. Above all, all the skaters were told to both be careful, and to be on their best behavior. So the first thing Ann did was nearly give Seltzer a heart attack, by leading a rib where Robinson, who was a flaming homosexual, started hitting on Deford. But with Ann doing everything Seltzer told her not to, the two became lifelong friends. Perhaps Ann's proudest media moment ever was when the 15-page back of the book feature came out.

"They sent him to knock us and when it was over, he gave us 15 pages of positive press," Calvello told me more than a decade later. "Nobody got 15 pages in those days."

And that wasn't enough, Deford ended up writing one of the best sports books of its time, "Five Strides on the Banked Track," devoting a chapter to the life story and exploits of Ann.

"Everyone was leery of me when I got there," he said. "I wanted to do it because it was part of American culture. Jerry was scared to death. He thought I would make fun of it and tell people that it wasn't legit. It didn't take a genius to see that. But Ann took me under her wing. She loved the press. She could see what I was doing before any of the others. The article was affectionate. I loved how they entertained their audience, and they were such great people. They were good working class people struggling and working hard for a buck. The men skaters set up the track before the games, and took it down after, because they could use the extra money."

"She never forgot anything," he said. "She remembered everyone's face and everyone's birthday. She was quick-witted. I was at the bar with her one night in Waterloo, IA. We saw a comedian and he was dying out there. Ann was really giving it to him, and not in a bad way. Finally he said, 'Why don't you come up here and join me.' She said, 'You need me a lot more than I need you.'"

"She carried a silver chalice with her in her pocketbook everywhere she went. When she'd go to the bar, she'd take it out and put it on the bar and tell the bartender to fill it up. She'd get three drinks for the price of one. And let me tell you, she could drink. She could hold her own with any man."

At the time, Calvello was dating a skater on her team named Eddie Krebs, who was 26. Deford said he'd see Krebs and you just knew she was just killing him with her other talents, and the skaters all knew it. Krebs was dying just trying to keep up with her, and the joke among the skaters was, Ann was looking 26, and Krebs was looking 40.

"She had a great body," he said. "Now, she had a face that would stop a truck. It wasn't just a tight athletic body. She had such style and personality that you could see where people would be attracted to her. I wouldn't call her glamorous, but she definitely had sex appeal. But in public, she was like one of the boys."

While comparisons to a female Freddie Blassie are probably fair, the two differed in one very important way. Blassie, like the wrestlers of the era, played their heel role whenever fans were around. And it was Blassie's interview style that inspired Muhammad Ali. Madonna, growing up, would watch Ann on TV, and it's pretty clear she was heavily influenced by what she saw.

But she was unlike Blassie or the pro wrestling heels of her time. She certainly got her hate mail (and she saved much of it and was proud of it later in life). There were nights she needed a police escort and fans certainly wanted to kill her when she cheap-shot the Bomber skaters. But she rarely ran into any trouble off the track. Deford said the off the field of play reaction to her in public was completely different than a wrestling heel, saying, long before this was the case in wrestling, she was a villain that, "People loved to hate."

Many times, before the game when she'd come out to warm-up, she'd be putting on a show from the moment she was out there, but in cities in the Bay Area, she'd skate around, recognize familiar faces and start conversations with the audience asking the weekly regulars about their family members that may not have been at the game, and sign autograph after autograph, and when she first hit the track would be politely cheered. She wasn't a heel until the buzzer sounded to start the game. Then she'd rile up the crowd, doing the old school wrestling trick of picking out one fan in the audience and getting on them, which would lead everyone to turn on her. She'd be out there as the center of attention with her mismatched elbow pads, mismatched laces, white lipstick on her overly tanned face and hair the same color of her uniform, or sometimes red, white and blue on patriotic holidays, or other colors if it struck her mood. Her nails matched her hair color. She wore her helmet tilted far back with a scarf and her special helmet with her name on it. She customized her uniform, cutting off the long sleeves and plunging the neckline "to free up the tickets" even though told by management she couldn't do it. Long before it was fashionable, or even allowable on television, she'd call spots where she'd be in a fight and try and get her bulky jersey to be pulled up and reveal a lacy bra, which was hardly kosher on television in the 60s when married couples in sitcoms had to have two different beds in the bedroom.

She'd always have fans throwing cups and sodas at her after a particularly dirty play or cheap shot. Her nose was broken so many times she was nicknamed "Banana Nose." Sometimes, as a way to get heat after a disturbance with the crowd riled up, the trackside announcer would say, "two minute penalty for Ann Theresa Calvello." Nothing else needed to be said, as everyone remembered something never mentioned on TV, but intuitively, everyone at games knew as part of the routine. Ann hated her middle name. Well, in real life, obviously that's not true since it was the name she gave her daughter. But it was easy heat, as fans would chant "Theresa" at her while she'd put her hands over her ears like they found something personal that would finally get to her. Once, a trackside fan who had brought an infant to the game with her, got so agitated at her dirty play, that she threw her baby at her. That was a legendary moment where time really stood still, but luckily, Ann caught it.

Once the game was over, she would sign autographs, and hang out with the ardent fans in the bar, as long as they abided by her rule, "No skating talk."

Even though Calvello skated for the opposition promotion, Griffiths always listed her name on the active roster in the Roller Games yearbooks during her most famous period with Derby. In 1969, during the season when Calvello's Pioneer was off, records showed he would bring her in as the star of his own red-shirt teams, the Chicago Hawks and Texas Outlaws, the only skater held with such respect to pull that off (Griffiths in fact, insisted that could never have happened, even though it did). Almost as improbably, at the age of 40, she was awarded Roller Derby Queen, an honor she never won before, that was supposed to go to the prettiest girl in the league.

During the 1969 road tour, the Derby skated three straight nights of sellouts at Madison Square Garden. As the 70s started, Seltzer was planning a movie (a documentary called "Derby" that got great reviews but was more of an art house film; while Roller Games skaters were in "Kansas City Bomber," with Raquel Welch, a weak movie but a huge deal at the time). He set his all-time attendance record on July 4, 1971, as Ann dyed her hair like a U.S. flag and skated before a sellout 34,000 fans at the Oakland Coliseum Stadium.

The record was broken at a Chicago game Calvello wasn't part of a year later when. They sold Comiskey Park out for a Pioneers vs. T-Birds interleague game on September 15, 1972, with 50,118 fans, and turned as many as 10,000 away—which actually did more harm than good psychologically to the Derby. The T-Birds had been on TV for five years but never came to Chicago live. Even those on the Derby side admitted it was the 10,000 fans the Pioneers always got for its Chicago sellouts at the Ampitheatre, and 40,000 first-time T-Bird fans who ended up, by the end of the game, even booing Joanie, the star of the Pioneers by that time, on her home turf.

Seltzer tried to use his promotional talents to go legit and buy an NHL franchise, the California Golden Seals, and was turned down by the league as he presented a marketing plan way ahead of its time with the idea of making going to the game a fun event surrounding the game itself. He knew he was in trouble when one of the owners voting on who would get the franchise, which came down to Seltzer or Oakland A's owner Charlie O. Finley, fell asleep while he made his presentation. He joked that wasn't what bothered him, but he realized things didn't look good when nobody bothered to wake him up. Seltzer figured his track record of the Bombers that year actually outdrawing the A's, as completely improbable as that sounds, would give him an edge with the owners. Instead, they only saw it as they were being courted by a Roller Derby guy and a Major League Baseball guy. Finley's ownership ended up being disastrous and the team soon moved.

Seltzer created ahead of their time marketing slogans, like "Roller Derby. The world where men and women play by the same rules," or "The sport with the speed of hockey and the contact of football." Ironically, in late 1971, a young broadcaster named Chet Coppock coined the phrase they'd open many broadcasts with, and turned out to be quite a sad irony, "This is the sport of the 70s."

By this point, there was far more demand for games than Seltzer could supply. The decision, which eventually killed the Derby, was to try and service the demand. Madison Square Garden wanted to own its own team and have games every few weeks. At the end of the 1971 season, the decision was to create some version of a real league with regional home teams, splitting the loved Bomber stars up. Charlie was sent to the New York Chiefs, who were part of a joint-venture between Seltzer and The Garden. Joanie was sent to the Chicago Pioneers, who would skate basically in the AWA territory. Ann was sent to the Ohio Jolters, who were based in Cincinnati. To help raise money, the Bombers were sold to a Texas group, with the idea that the famed World champion Bay Bombers name, but without its two franchise stars, would draw. During 1971, both Charlie and Joanie suffered serious injuries that kept them out most of the year, and the Bombers still had a big year in the Bay Area, so the thought was the team name itself was a draw. The teams would skate both home and road games, real standings would be kept and published in newspapers, and it would be like any honest to goodness league, except it was still a work and every game still was decided on the last play.

It shouldn't have taken a genius to figure out the problems. When the local team was on the road, their games were shown weekly in the home markets. While WWF doing this inadvertently in 1997 with the Bret Hart/Steve Austin Canada/USA feud may have created the momentum to turn the company around and was one of the best creative periods ever, in 1972, fans seeing their babyfaces on television play like heels and booed didn't work. It was one thing for this to happen with the NBA, but the teams just played the game, and didn't reverse roles and change styles in a morality play. Plus, Joanie was terrible at playing a villain. She could do enough to get the people to boo her and had experience playing red-shirt so knew all the tricks, but nobody ever really wanted to, and she just projected niceness, even when cheating. The fans in Ohio and Indiana had no trouble cheering Ann, but by that point in her life, she was no longer a great skater as much as a great villain, and the white-shirt captain role called for you to outskate your opposition. Plus, Ann, by this point loved being the villain, there was nobody better at it, and didn't want to do anything else. But the combination of a summer and winter season meant more games, and more money. Ann made \$22,000 in 1971. It was her best year ever.

Cliff Butler, the men's star of the Jolters, got tired of being in Ohio in the winter, and came home, so the team was without a strong men's draw. Than Ann blew out her knee, and had to return home for treatment. Her real-life Mickie James-like fan club president, who went everywhere looking like her and dressing like her, had done so much work praising her lengthy career, that both the state of Indiana and the city of Indianapolis declared April 15, 1972, as Ann Calvello Day. Unfortunately, because of her injury, she wasn't there the night she was supposed to be honored. That year, she made her 14th all-star team. Because of her knee problems that plagued her the next two years, she missed in Derby's final season of 1973, the singular honor of being on both the first and the last all-star team.

Without the two top stars, the Jolters stopped drawing, and became a red-shirt team, with the Pioneers being given the territory. Calvello was out for almost a year. During the interim, many more things happened. The Bombers couldn't draw in Texas without the stars, and the new owners ended up bailing out. The league took them back over and used them as a red-shirt team during the winter, and the home team in the Bay Area during the summer. The Chiefs, and even more so the Pioneers, were big successes in their first year. The Chiefs didn't always sellout Madison Square Garden, but did for big games, and drew between 11,000 and 15,000 for regular appearances. The Pioneers always sold out the Ampitheatre in Chicago (10,000), and drew well almost everywhere else.

Many things changed by the time Ann came back with the return of the Brooklyn Red Devils in 1973 during the Northern California summer season. When Ann returned, she began talking about how she had the hots for Joe Namath so they could compare their knee injuries. Bay Area business was down noticeably. July 4th weekend had become an annual tradition for the biggest show of the year, an outdoor doubleheader at the Stadium in Oakland, and always did better than 20,000 fans. They didn't even bother booking a big show, and Ann and the Red Devils worked a one-shot at the Rose Bowl against the T-Birds. By this point, Charlie returned to the Bombers, as Bill Groll had become popular enough with the Chiefs fans that he could be their superstar. Panic booking ensued, including breaking the ultimate code of the game with long-time referee Bill Morrissey going heel, and more infield managers that would interfere, one of whom used a hammer as his gimmick. Charlie once match-raced Morrissey. Another time he match-raced two long-retried skaters in a two-on-one handicap match. In playing off the Billy Jean King-Bobby Riggs tennis showdown, Jerry had the new Bombers woman star, Margie Laszlo, a tall former model who suffered by being almost a younger brunette version of Weston, similar physically but lacking Joanie's outgoing charm and charisma, match race male star Bob Woodberry, violating the premise where males and females never skated against each other because of the credibility issue. Roller Games did stuff like that all the time, and the fans were fine with it, but in San Francisco, it was only making things worse. The games got wilder, and the people weren't accepting it. Besides, after nearly two decades of doing the same act, Charlie was getting older, and Joanie was trying to play heel when the Pioneers came to town and lots of fans would cheer for her against the Bombers. They did a mixed match race with Ann and Red Devil coach Woodberry against Charlie and Laszlo. Woodberry took a bump and landed on Calvello wrong, and destroyed her already bad knee. She needed another operation and pins were put in. Ann said that she was less mad about the injury than the fact her going to the hospital forced her to cancel a date that night with a 49ers star.

After recovering, she decided to go on an extended vacation to Hawaii until she could get back on the track. In December, while hanging out at the beach, she was shocked to find two people walking fast toward her, particularly since they looked like Joanie and secret husband Nick Scopas (while most husband-wife pairings in Derby were heavily promoted to the fans, Joanie's recent marriage was always kept secret). She knew that they were supposed to be in the Midwest for the winter season. Ann asked Joanie, "What are you doing here?" And Joanie responded, "What are you doing here?" Ann said she was hanging out recuperating from her injury. And Joanie said, "Didn't you hear? Jerry just shut down the Derby."

She had started with the company in 1949, and 24 years later, had become its best villain ever, and for years had been the "go to" person when dealing with the media. The company folded, and she never even got a phone call.

"Ann, because of her charisma and colorful personality, was of great importance to Roller Derby," said Jerry Seltzer. "She and Joan Weston were our most requested personalities, and they were also the most willing and cooperative to do all the interviews. She started skating in 1948, before my era, and became a star in the 50s because of her flamboyance. She and Joan were the greatest rivalry since the Toughie Brasuhn-Gerry Murray match-ups. She loved being the villain, and was totally unnerved when she was on the home team and people cheered for her. Yet, she was a loved villain, although that sounds improbable, and people knew she really had a caring personality. The reason she was the most quotable was because that was her. I don't

think when she talked she even consciously thought about trying to sell tickets."

There was no single reason why Derby died. It's a book in itself. As noted, the 1973 Bay Area season was bad. Seltzer booked a Memorial Day one-night Gold Cup championship tournament tripleheader at Shea Stadium in New York as the biggest event in Derby history, expecting to sellout. A day or two before the event, Seltzer called Ticketron and was told 29,000 tickets had been sold. In those days, most business was done in the final few days, particularly walk-up, so that was a good figure. The morning of the show, he called up again, and was again given the figure 29,000. That meant nobody had bought a ticket for 72 hours. After demanding an explanation, he was told the computers had been down for three days so everyone who tried to get tickets was given the impression the event was sold out. Worse, that was the first he had heard about it. And word got around about no tickets being available, killing the walk-up. Bad weather that day didn't help matters. The actual crowd was 27,135 fans. Jerry was furious about not being appraised of what was going on by the people he considered his business partners, about being lied to and couldn't believe a company he'd worked with for years would do it to him. There was also major dissension at the event regarding who would win the championship. The Pioneers were the best drawing team, but The Chiefs were always favored because they were in New York, and this was on their home turf. The Pioneers skaters strongly felt they deserved it that year, particularly since the Chiefs won both the winter and summer championship the year before. In addition, a surprisingly large throng of the audience came in from the Midwest. As shocking as this sounds, during the playoffs, the skaters were usually not told who would go over until halftime of the championship game. It wasn't a big deal, as for years, the Bombers, and then after the expansion, the Chiefs, always went over. The skaters always knew to keep it close so it would be decided on the last jam.

This time, Seltzer didn't make his call until the last few minutes of the final period, and when the word hit the track the Chiefs were winning, one of the Pioneers' top men skaters, Bob Hein, walked off before the finish.

The Arab oil embargo and ensuing gas lines of that winter made it hard for skaters to get enough gas to get to games, and all live events suffered because fans, with gas rationing, weren't traveling long distances to games. Because of problems with skaters getting enough gas to travel to games, Seltzer had to cancel 40 dates, consolidating two touring groups to one and whether it was the embargo making it hard to get gas, a surprising slump, or clear signs an era was over, the dates not canceled drew well under par. Suddenly, the company was actually losing somewhat significant money.

It may have been different a few years earlier. Because Seltzer and the skaters struggled together from nothing to being something big, he really did consider them family, even if they were never paid well. But some skaters got a hotshot lawyer and went on strike at the end of the 1972 season, and vowed to bring Seltzer to his knees. He rectified things with added benefits and a profit-sharing plan that was years ahead of its time in sports, but he feared another strike might be coming the next year, and his attitude had clearly changed with the desperation evident in the final Bay Area season. He was also going through a very bitter divorce, and his wife's family may have wound up with 50% interest in Roller Derby, the business his father started and he saved, and he'd have to deal with partners who might interfere. While this was the strongest rumored reason at the time of the close, Seltzer and some of the top skaters have always strongly discounted that one. He looked at the future. Charlie and Joanie were both 38. And while he had created a league with many stars, none of the new stars could match their drawing power.

Worse, and this wasn't known at the time by anyone but Jerry, KTVU had told him that effective the end of 1973, that they were canceling Roller Derby. Ratings were still high, but he was told it was because there was pressure to cut down the amount of violence on television. Walt Harris, who worked at the station and blamed the league closing on the cancellation, blamed it on a new program director coming from out of San Francisco, with no knowledge of the Derby's role in the station's history, and even decades later, was bitter about how it went

down. He said it wasn't so much the violence but the new man in charge thought the station should have high standards in its programming, and, like the folding of WCW, felt Roller Derby, regardless of popularity, was low standard programming.

When he went to the other major stations in the market, they all expressed the same concern about the pressure to have less violence on television, and wouldn't pick it up. There is no question he could have gotten TV on a weaker UHF channel easily. But if the league's flagship station for nearly 15 years, that he had his best history of ratings in his home city would cancel him and his long history of being the show that put the station on the map in the first place couldn't save him, he worried greatly about the future of his syndication network.

Still, having said all that, the league was flourishing in 1972, and whatever excuse can be given, it fell badly in 1973, and no version ever did consistently good business again. Society was changing, because why else with dozens and dozens of attempts to rebuild it, many versions with strong television, did none ever even come close?

For decades, almost all the skaters, and most fans, were bitter that Seltzer would pull the plug because things weren't really that bad, at least not yet. Financially, WWF went through far worse during its down periods. But he saw the future, and had brought it to a certain level and he himself was very financially comfortable. He didn't want to risk what he'd earned, and didn't want to go through the mental and financial pressure and anguish of keeping it going and seeing it go back down, as he strongly believed it would.

As big as Derby's ratings were, they never made a dime off television. Virtually all the money was made selling tickets to the live events, and for a dozen years, that varied between enough to get by, and at other times a strong winning formula. The only merchandise were the programs and yearbooks sold at the live events. Seltzer felt, after all those years, if he were to ask stations to pay him for the tapes that were delivering ratings, particularly under the political climate, to make up for the dwindling live gates, he'd just end up getting canceled. Transportation costs were escalating with gas prices going up. Union costs in many of the big cities was going up as far as arena costs. It was a pragmatic business decision.

As bitter as everyone was, hindsight has proven it to be prophetic. Griffiths had it all to himself, and combined both leagues, creating teams filled with more proven stars than ever before, and home bases in Japan, Eastern Canada, keeping the Chiefs in New York, the Warriors team in Philadelphia (Jerry Hill sold that operation to Griffiths in 1972 at its peak), the Cats in Baltimore (a spinoff because the Warriors got so popular they were able to make money running two shows per night, so split the team up and created a new team in the Southern half of the territory which included the Carolinas south to running the Omni in Atlanta), while the T-Birds were home team in not only Los Angeles, but Chicago and even San Francisco—actually they were practically a national home team except in the regions of the country that had their own franchises. They added many of the popular Bombers from the past, including Charlie and Joanie, mixed in with the T-Bird favorites and Pioneer favorites. But, there were many similarities between this and what happened after the folding of WCW with WWF. Charlie and Joanie, because of their superstar status, got to control the games and do what they wanted in Derby. Griffith's goal, even though he picked up both of their hefty contracts, was to break them mentally, Charlie in particular, and try to use them as just names on the team because they would help him draw in the Derby strongholds, but they weren't his people and he wanted to make sure they couldn't control him. Since they were older, he didn't want them as his biggest stars. Really, in his own strongholds, he had developed skaters that were younger and far better known and more popular in those markets. Charlie quit relatively fast, and never worked for Griffiths again. Joanie lasted longer before leaving, and thus ended up being more bitter in the end.

Griffiths tried to mix the Derby and Games formula, recognizing the fans of each had their preferences. Many fans were fans of one and not the other. Many even somewhat despised the other style. The mix turned out to be something both fan bases didn't want, and crowds dwindled everywhere. Ann's knee wasn't fully recovered, but he

brought her in as an infield manager when foreign teams would skate against his various home teams, managing Team Canada, the Tokyo Bombers (Roller Games were big in Japan for a number of years), and the Latin Liberators because she was a familiar heel who could do the promo work necessary to sell local fans on the largely unknown foreigners. To make sense of her appearing on the infield with one different team after another, she was said to be the league's international liaison. After the T-Birds failed to draw in the Bay Area, Griffiths tried to restart the Bombers, but that failed as well. Barely six months after Seltzer got out, Griffiths' league was dying on every home front. The Warriors and Cats were combined and became the Warrior-Cats, and won the first and last super league championship over the Chiefs before only 7,000 fans at Madison Square Garden.

Griffiths reformed the Bombers in late 1974. They actually put not only Joanie and Ann on the same team, which made no sense, but even brought back Annis Jensen, who was even older than Ann, after nearly a decade off the team,, as the three great Bay Area women's superstars together on the same team for the first time ever. But Seltzer's timing was right, as no revival really ever caught on.

Seltzer, stemming from his trouble at Shea Stadium, went on to form BASS tickets in the Bay Area, a business that ended up being more successful financially for him than Roller Derby. This only increased the bitterness of the skaters put on the unemployment line, although years later, Ann and Seltzer ended up on at least seemingly good public terms.

A few years later, Leo Seltzer, now in his 70s, realized the one thing that was his real life's legacy was his invention of Roller Derby, which for all real purposes, no longer existed. He kept talking about starting a league up again, but his son would continually talk him out of it, saying it just couldn't work. Jerry tried to explain to his father that their periods of success were based more on the nature of television, getting in on the ground floor with something different in the 50s, and the growth of UHF stations in the 60s looking for a cheap product that people watched. But on the other hand, virtually every argument made at the time could have also applied to pro wrestling at the time, which survived that and every other economic downturn and seemed to always come back stronger. Just a few years earlier, when the game was at its peak and the older Seltzer would give pep talks before games in Madison Square Garden, he was sometimes compared in the media to Dr. James Naismith, the man who invented the sport of basketball. By 1978, Leo had heard enough of his son telling him that his life's work was something whose time was past, and he recognized at this rate it was on the verge of all being forgotten forever. As an old man who was in good financial shape, he recognized if Derby lived on, he'd in a sense have a type of sports immortality. He made the decision to bring it back. Just as he was setting up the revival, he passed away that year at the age of 74.

There were at least four more failures before a weekend league called the IRSL got TV, first on a local sports channel and then on weak UHF stations in the Bay Area. It actually ran uninterrupted, every summer from 1978 until folding in 1987, including a mid-80s run on ESPN. Charlie actually started it with his own money, along with Gammon (who ended up falling out when Charlie ended up with Mike's wife, Judi McGuire, and Mike subsequently wound up with Charlie's wife Vicki) and announcer Don Drewry. Ann and Joanie did their thing, and sometimes it drew packed houses in small arenas, but it never got strong local television and really was always just barely surviving. Once around this time, during some sort of a ceremony, hosted by a local TV sportscaster who is long gone from the scene, Ann got an award and started making out with the sportscaster in the infield during halftime of a game. The sportscaster then continued the ceremony, saying "Ann was the best—I can't say it—in the Bay Area."

Charlie quit in 1979, and was never seen again. After sitting out three years except a few local reunion games, he was determined to get it back to where it once was. Charlie learned right away it wasn't going to be easy when he went to KTVU, the station the Bombers put on the map and he was the first big TV star on, predating Ray Stevens by three years, and they wouldn't even give him the time of day. After skating for two more years, two things happened. First, he was now old himself, and was unable to physically dominate the game against

bigger and younger skaters who were in their primes, including suffering a serious eye injury. Although injuries were nothing new to him because of his style of play, when he came back, for the first time in his career, he was the one backing off the contact from the tough guys. Second, after two years, he realized it was going nowhere. Rather than allow people see him as less the star than he once was, unlike with Griffiths where he was booked to not shine, he walked away and never looked back. For years, the games survived on the nostalgia drawing principle. When starting the season in April, many of the early season games drew well, as people came to relive the Joanie vs. Annie feud as well as simply see the game they grew up on, but it usually doing progressively worse as the summer wore on. The same stars in 1973 were still the stars of 1987, with very little new talent coming or, and those that did were being held back by aging veterans clinging to the stardom that no longer existed, petrified about having to relive the end of 1973 when it abruptly ended. The weekend league, which even brought games back to Chicago, and several times to Madison Square Garden, sputtered to a halt, simply running out of money.

Ann worked in somewhat anonymity at a produce market most of this period. On her days off work, she often sunbathed nude in Pacifica, CA. She actually did this into her 70s. When she was in her late 40s, laying out at the nude beach, she was picked up on by John William Clouser, who for years topped the FBI's "Most Wanted List." He had not only eluded police for years, but bragged about it publicly, writing an autobiography called, "The Most Wanted Man in America." He pursued Ann after meeting her, and they dated for a while before she finally broke things off when he wanted to get serious.

While Ann stayed on as the top red-shirt draw, she was aging and clearly a nostalgia act. The league was careful to make sure to have a younger good skater on her team, and she was unselfish enough not to pull rank, allowing her teammate to be the focal point in the skating part of the game, and she concentrated on just doing her trademark heel spots. She always drove her 1974 Lincoln Continental Mark IV, with the license plate reading "Lover," to the games (a car she still owned until she would no longer drive). She was unique among the old guard as she was the only one who pushed hard for young skaters to excel, and thus among the younger skaters, she was regarded with reverence.

She continued to skate for one revival group after another, until finally, with her health failing, in 1997, her fellow skaters not-so-kindly forced her out of the game. Although it was the right move, it left tremendous bitterness, and perhaps undeserving, because she was having trouble getting around the track by this point. Jan Vallow came off as the big heel in "Demon of the Derby" for insisting Ann no longer play because she was badly slowing down the game. At the same time, Joanie, who skated until she was also past 60, with her last game in 1996 at the Cow Palace, was stricken with Mad Cow disease, and died a horrible death at the age of 62. While Ann and Joanie, in life and death, will always be linked together, off the track, they never socialized, and often talked badly about each other. Some liked to say it was keeping up a skater's version of kayfabe, but those close to the situation noted they were entirely different personalities. Joanie thought Ann's antics cheapened the game, and Ann thought Joanie never fully understood that while Sandy Dunn or Jan Vallow were better skaters and she skated superior games with them, that it was the way the two were so different, but almost symbiotic, that made both of them larger than life.

Still, it was little known, as Ann would never let even the media know, that as Joanie was dying, she would frequently go to the hospital to do whatever she could to in some small way comfort her badly suffering rival whose body and mind were being eaten away. Joanie's funeral was fairly well covered in the Bay Area, and Ann chose not to attend. Perhaps this was the one occasion she didn't want to be in the spotlight, preferring to pay her last tributes at a quiet wake the night before.

Shortly after Joanie died, Goldie Hawn was interested in buying the rights to do a movie based on her life. After researching around San Francisco, her people decided her off the track life was too wholesome, and they couldn't find any real dirt on her, so the project was dropped.

Even though it was the right move, the aging and dwindling fan base, they was not happy with Ann out of the game. With Joanie and Charlie gone, to them, Ann was Roller Derby—both the worst skater on the track, and the biggest star.

After closing, Jerry spent the next 24 years constantly hearing from people, who claimed to have money, wanting his expertise in helping bring it back. He would always nicely say that it simply couldn't work because times had changed and the fan base was gone. After Joanie's death, when TNN came to him, and he went to tell them the same story, they explained that they were a network and had the capacity to finance a training school, and to put the game on television for a year to build interest while paying skaters far more than Jerry ever paid, before even thinking about house shows. They recognized the old fan base was gone, but they had the patience and the money to build a new fan base. Plus, there was a pay-per-view, and wrestling, which in most markets didn't draw nearly as well as Derby in Jerry's heyday, had become hugely profitable. Plus there were all kinds of new revenue stream, like merchandising and licensing. For the first time, Jerry thought it could work. But when the people who talked him into getting involved saw him as a dinosaur not understanding the world of television, he just as quickly realized they didn't know the first thing about Roller Derby. He was back on TV, as commissioner, but very quickly, his heart was clearly not into it.

Even if she couldn't be a part of it, Ann, like Joanie, desperately wanted to live to see Derby return to prominence. When she went to Florida for her RollerJam appearance, and freaked out when she was actually handed a script, she also befriended a young blond skater who she thought had the potential to be the next big star who would bring the game back. Stacy Blitsch (believe it or not, her real name), nicknamed "Sexy Stacy," had already been written about in TV Guide as one of the prettiest women on television, and ended up as RollerJam's top female star, although it was a game that never truly caught on after a lot of hype. She had the looks, really, like no Derby skater ever had, and in what seemed to be too good to be true for Calvello, she was the best athlete as well and could some tricks on skates none of the women in the Derby's prime could do. Blitsch had been told the legend of Calvello by the older skaters in "RollerJam" who were from her era, so before ever meeting her, she had complete admiration for what she had done. At the "Demon of the Derby" premiere, about a year after RollerJam folded, she brought Stacy and introduced her to everyone as the girl that was going to bring the game back. She got the local promoters to bring her in and convinced them she was the new blood the game needed, even though she was an "outsider," taught by people outside the Bay Area with no Derby pedigree. What happened on the track when she was put into a game was bad, something almost unspoken. Evidently the older skaters, in their late 40s and even into their 60s, the last surviving remnants of the death of 1973, saw this Trish Stratus looking girl as competition for their top spots. They decided to make her quit, and savagely brutalized her in the games, to the point even the most ardent Derby supporters admitted this was sheer ugliness. They succeeded, and she did quit, and was never heard from again.

"I mean, who wouldn't want a beautiful girl, with a great body, who was a great athlete, and who could really skate out there?," said Fitzpatrick rhetorically. Ann took this as a personal insult, but still never turned her back on the last remnants of the original game, then in its 29th year of post-mortem depression, waiting for the inevitable return to glory.

Ann's passion when she was no longer part of whatever existed of Roller Derby, was wrestling. She regularly attended area WWF and WCW shows until she stopped driving the last few years. Some of the wrestlers who grew up watching Derby were big fans for her. I can recall being after matches and a wrestler or two would act like a kid seeing Ann Calvello at the hotel, like many would do when Lou Thesz or another old legend would attend the matches. She religiously followed it during the Monday Night Wars. She'd call up Will McCoy, the WWE's local promoter for events in Northern California, when the shows were over to discuss what happened, or catch her up if she missed one of the shows. She was honored several times in recent years at independent wrestling shows. Friends remember her really broken up at the death of Eddy Guerrero. She'd go to the matches well into her 60s, dressed up in clothes most 40 year olds wouldn't dare wear, and quite frankly, it was kind of noticeable, but that was Ann, to

see her in them. Her bedroom was said to have a photo of her posing with one of wrestling's biggest stars, stripped naked, and wearing only a belt (don't try guessing because you won't guess correctly).

Ann's last years were not good, as the excesses of her life caught up with her. After the brain cancer, she was diagnosed with melanoma behind one of her eyeballs, from all her years in the sun. They had to remove the eye to treat it. She drank heavily throughout her life. There was a scene in the movie where alcohol wasn't allowed backstage at a game, where she circumvented it by hiding booze in her shampoo and conditioner bottle. This likely led to the liver cancer that did her in. Many in the sports media locally would cast her triumphantly, for keeping her head up high and being the same center of attention, talking with everyone, while working bagging groceries, or taking tickets at the 49ers games. It wasn't a bad thing, it was portrayed as simply she didn't make big money, and now she's a local landmark, the most famous bagger and ticket taker in the area. It was portrayed as being kind of cool, that anyone could go to Safeway in Millbrae and see a very approachable, still larger than life honest-to-goodness living sports legend.

On occasion, she'd sell some of her old uniforms on ebay. There were probably only 50 to 100 crazy Derby fans left, but they would often bid very high against each other. Once, when a bid got out of control for a uniform, she was almost embarrassed, and threw in some extras like old elbow pads or championship game laces, and gave the fan her phone number and told him to call her at any time.

But kept quiet was when she was around 70, and she realized how bad her health was and feared it getting worse, and her job didn't have good insurance, she took a job at the local Kaiser Permanente Hospital as an after hours janitor, in uniform and everything. Few knew, but the people who knew her that bumped into her, because this role was never known in the media, had to fight back tears. There was no way to portray this in a cheery light.

She was in tremendous pain in her last few weeks, and one friend after another remarked they were glad she wouldn't have to suffer for months as everyone was expecting. She could feel the tumor in her liver and this pain was not like the previous cancer escapades that never broke her spirit. Her voice was weak and she couldn't talk without being exhausted. Still, she called many of her friends. She told local newsman Gary Radnich the reason they were so tight was because they both understood how to get over by agitating the crowds. She called Frank Deford to tell him she saw him on HBO Real Sports and he was looking good, and liked the suit he was wearing, noting it matched her hair color when she was with the Pioneers. By this point, drinking water was a tough chore and it was even harder eating the baby food that was all her body could keep down. She could barely talk on the phone, and to the skaters, she'd just whisper that she knew this was it.

Skaters and fans from around the world sent her messages. One of her former NFL beaus was making plans to visit her the day she died. She was stunned to get a card from Charlie & Judi O'Connell, who seemingly nobody had heard from in decades. When she got the word on 3/3 that it was cancer, and it wasn't treatable by chemotherapy or radiation, she told Dave Marez, a fellow skater, to get the word out that she knows this is it.

Marez wrote, "She wants to thank everyone for everything. She also said she understands that so many people care about her, and she is grateful for living this blessed life."

A week later, she went for a follow-up appointment, and the doctors told he she had only four to six months left to live. A few days later, she was in so much pain that her long-time partner, Billy Prieto, went to call the ambulance. She wouldn't have it, and told him they were driving in. She died that afternoon.

There are a lot of people I want to thank for help on the following story, from Frank Deford of Sports Illustrated for his help in putting her talents into a real perspective, to former Roller Derby skater Jim Fitzpatrick, Roller Games insider Curtis Minato, and a few others who know who they are and are better left unmentioned who did so much extensive research on the time period just based on curiosity of where this all came from. I'd also like to thank Steve Chiaverini for maintaining an archive on what would be otherwise long lost records that helped make sense of the various stories and faded memories and put them into their correct historical context, and the many different readers who pointed me in the direction and encouraged me to tackle this project. And believe me, this has been a project like few others. When Ann Calvello passed away two weeks ago, I received an inordinate amount of phone calls, and many e-mails, saying that I need to do the big bio of her. At first I thought this was not the place for it, and it completely intimidated me because of the time it would need. I also thought anything longer than two pages would take up too much space for a story that I thought at first would only interest a small percentage of readers. But I also knew that was impossible. Even without talking to anyone, I've been living here long enough and had dealt with Ann Calvello from watching her live on Sunday afternoons and Monday nights every summer growing up, to doing an award nominated feature on her in college, to seeing her around wrestling for decades, to being at the world premiere of the movie on her life, to know that do this story justice, there were only two choices. Do it right, or don't do it at all. Rather than isolate Calvello's life as a vacuum, to put it into its perspective, we have to look at the world she came from, and some of the personalities that made it tick. For those who think it's a waste of space, you're getting a double issue for the price of a single. For those who don't, you're getting what the few who have read it have already told me is one of the best issues of the Observer ever.